



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATE-PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS



Neglectful, Exploitative, and Abusive Research Advisors are Driving Graduate Students Out of School

Graduate students face unique problems. Unlike undergraduate students and professional students, their education is not centered on taking classes and passing major exams. Instead, they are primarily under the direction of a single faculty member, their research advisor. This relationship is like an “employer-employee” relationship, with the advisor providing funding for and overseeing the work of the student, work that impacts the advisor’s ability to get research funding and university resources. Advisors are highly motivated to maximize the work they can get out of their graduate students.

However, unlike a typical “employer-employee” relationship, **advisors do not currently have to demonstrate an ability to teach, lead, or manage people effectively**; they only have to be successful in research. This means that many advisors lack the tools needed to effectively oversee students. Additionally, **graduate students are not protected by most employee protection laws** and instead have to rely on regulations designed for undergraduate students which inadequately address the power dynamics between graduate students and their advisors. Finally, unlike undergraduate programs, **graduate students have no systematic way for them to change advisors or programs**. Not only does their work not “transfer”, many students are accepted into a program specifically to work with their advisor - few others are able to oversee their research. Some students are able to change advisors, but this process is extremely lengthy and stressful, and most students suffer long-term emotional, financial, and professional consequences by having to change advisors, and many students end up dropping out of school entirely.

As a result, many graduate students are underpaid and overworked, working 60 hours a week and earning less than a living wage. They are subject to a wide range of neglectful, exploitative, and abusive behaviors, including being forced to teach their advisor’s courses without compensation, run personal errands, and tolerate verbal abuse and harassment. Complaints can cause a student to lose their position, funding, and future jobs. Largely due to this relationship, graduate students are suffering **mental health problems at a rate six times that of the general population** - nearly half have anxiety and/or depression and one in ten are suicidal. Half of doctoral students dropout of school before completing their degree.

The continued welfare of the US workforce requires that graduate students receive adequate training and oversight from their research advisors. Therefore, we ask for the following:

- Transparent data on **graduate program completion rates** and student quality of life;
- Increased **mental health resources** for campuses and communities;
- **Expanded protections** for full-time graduate and professional students, including measures to protect against harassment, discrimination, and exploitative work practices;
- Funding agencies to include **mentorship evaluation** in grant applications;
- Incentives for IHEs to **implement advisor best practices**, including advisor flexibility and mentorship training.